A Compendium of Factsheets: Wellbeing Across the Lifecourse

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WELLBEING AND HEALTH

- There is a two way relationship between wellbeing and health: health influences wellbeing and wellbeing itself influences health
- Health is one of the top things people say matters for wellbeing
- Both physical and mental health influence wellbeing, however mental health and wellbeing are independent dimensions, mental health is not simply the opposite of mental illness.

- The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that “wellbeing exists in two dimensions, subjective and objective. It comprises an individual’s experience of their life as well as a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values”. Examples of life circumstance include health, education, work, social relationships, built and natural environments, security, civic engagement and governance, housing and work-life balance. Subjective experiences include a person’s overall sense of wellbeing, psychological functioning and affective states.

- Health is one of the top things people say matters to wellbeing.

- Both physical health and mental health can influence wellbeing. Recent acute health problems affect wellbeing most but longer-term chronic ill health also has an effect on wellbeing.

- The relationship between health and wellbeing is not just one-way – health influences wellbeing and wellbeing itself influences health. There are a number of correlations between wellbeing and physical health outcomes, improved immune system response, higher pain tolerance, increased longevity, cardiovascular health, slower disease progression and reproductive health (see Figure 1).

- The effect of wellbeing on health is substantial (but variable) and comparable to other risk factors more traditionally targeted by public health such as a healthy diet.

- Wellbeing and mental illness are correlated with depression and anxiety, which are associated with low levels of wellbeing.

- Mental illness and wellbeing are independent dimensions; mental health is not simply the opposite of mental illness. It is possible for someone to have a mental disorder and high levels of wellbeing. It is also possible for someone to have low levels of wellbeing without having a mental disorder. Most associations are only moderately altered by adjusting for severity of mental disorder.

- Good health is also correlated with higher life satisfaction.
• Wellbeing is a shared government objective. It can also provide a shared objective around which to engage to deliver health benefits. For example, promoting physical activity has benefits for health but it also has a benefit for wellbeing. In addition, strengthening social networks and time spent socialising benefit wellbeing as well as improving mental health in particular. 

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10 Haller, M. & Hadler, M., 2006, How social relations and structures can produce happiness and unhappiness: An international comparative analysis, Social Indicators Research, 75(2), pp. 169-216
11 The diagram draws on recent overviews of the evidence regarding wellbeing e.g. new economics foundation Stoll, L., Michaelson, J. & Seaford, C., 2012, Well-being evidence for policy: a review, new economics foundation, London and has been developed for inclusion in a working paper produced for the WHO Expert Group on Wellbeing, October 2012